Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

HAROLD PINTER

NO MAN'S LAND

a play

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PLAYS

Ashes to Ashes • *Betrayal* • *The Birthday Party* • *The Caretaker* • *Celebration and the Room* • *The Collection and the Lover* • *The Homecoming* • *The Hothouse* • *Landscape And Silence* • *Mountain Language* • *Moonlight* • *No Man's Land* • *Old Times* • *One For The Road* • *Other Places* (A Kind of Alaska, Victoria Station, Family Voices) • *Party Time* • *Remembrance of Things Past* (with Di Trevis) • *The Room and the Dumb Waiter* • *A Slight Ache and Other Plays* • *Tea Party and Other Plays*

Plays One

(*The Birthday Party, The Room, The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache, The Hothouse, A Night Out,* "The Black and White," "The Examination")

Plays Two

(*The Caretaker, The Dwarfs, The Collection, The Lover, Night School, Trouble in the Works, The Black and White, Request Stop, Last to Go, Special Offer*)

Plays Three

(*The Homecoming, Tea Party, The Basement, Landscape, Silence, Night, That's Your Trouble, That's All, Applicant, Interview, Dialogue for Three, "*Tea Party*," Old Times, No Man's Land*)

Plays Four

(*Betrayal, Monologue, One for the Road, Mountain Language, Family Voices, A Kind of Alaska, Victoria Station, Precisely, The New World Order, Party Time, Moonlight, Ashes to Ashes, Celebration, Umbrellas, God's District, Apart from That*)

SCREENPLAYS

Harold Pinter Collected Screenplays One

(*The Servant, The Pumpkin Eater, The Quiller Memorandum, Accident, The Last Tycoon, Langrishe, Go Down*)

Harold Pinter Collected Screenplays Two

(*The Go-Between, The Proust Screenplay, Victory, Turtle Diary, Reunion*)

Harold Pinter Collected Screenplays Three

(*The French Lieutenant's Woman, The Heat of the Day, The Comfort of Strangers, The Trial, The Dreaming Child*)

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The Dwarfs (a novel)

100 Poems by 100 Poets (an anthology)

99 Poems in Translation (an anthology)

Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948–2005

War

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HAROLD PINTER

No Man’s Land

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TO JIMMY WAX

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No Man's Land was first presented by the National Theatre at the Old Vic, London, on 23 April 1975, with the following cast:

HIRST: Ralph Richardson
SPOONER: John Gielgud
FOSTER: Michael Feast
BRIGGS: Terence Rigby

Directed by Peter Hall
Designed by John Bury

This production transferred to Wyndham's Theatre, London, on 15 July 1975.

The play was revived at the Almeida Theatre, London, on 2 November 1992, with the following cast:

HIRST: Harold Pinter
SPOONER: Paul Eddington
FOSTER: Douglas Hodge
BRIGGS: Gawn Grainger

Directed by David Leveaux
Designed by Bob Crowley

This production transferred to the Comedy Theatre, London, in February 1993.

The play was revived on the Lyttelton stage of the National Theatre, London, on 6 December 2001, with the following cast:

HIRST: Corin Redgrave
SPOONER: John Wood
FOSTER: Danny Dyer
BRIGGS: Andy de la Tour

Directed by Harold Pinter
Designed by Eileen Diss

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CHARACTERS

HIRST, a man in his sixties

SPOONER, a man in his sixties

FOSTER, a man in his thirties

BRIGGS, a man in his forties

PLACE

A large room in a house in North West London. Well but sparely furnished. A strong and comfortable straight-backed chair, in which Hirst sits. A wall of bookshelves, with various items of pottery acting as bookstands, including two large mugs.

Heavy curtains across the window.

The central feature of the room is an antique cabinet, with marble top, brass gallery and open shelves, on which stands a great variety of bottles: spirits, aperitifs, beers, etc.

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ACT ONE

Summer.

Night.

SPOONER *stands in the centre of the room. He is dressed in a very old and shabby suit, dark faded shirt, creased spotted tie.*

HIRST *is pouring whisky at the cabinet. He is precisely dressed. Sports jacket. Well cut trousers.*

HIRST As it is?

SPOONER As it is, yes please, absolutely as it is.

Hirst brings him the glass.

SPOONER Thank you. How very kind of you. How very kind.

Hirst pours himself a vodka.

HIRST Cheers.

SPOONER Your health.

They drink. Spooner sips, Hirst drinks the vodka in one gulp. He refills his glass, moves to his chair and sits. Spooner empties his glass.

HIRST Please help yourself.

SPOONER Terribly kind of you.

Spooner goes to cabinet, pours. He turns.

SPOONER Your good health.

He drinks.

SPOONER What was it I was saying, as we arrived at your door?

HIRST Ah . . . let me see.

SPOONER Yes! I was talking about strength. Do you recall?

HIRST Strength. Yes.

SPOONER Yes. I was about to say, you see, that there are some people who appear to be strong, whose idea of what strength consists of is persuasive, but who inhabit the idea and not the fact. What they possess is not strength

but expertise. They have nurtured and maintain what is in fact a calculated posture. Half the time it works. It takes a man of intelligence and perception to stick a needle through that posture and discern the essential flabbiness of the stance. I am such a man.

HIRST You mean one of the latter?

SPOONER One of the latter, yes, a man of intelligence and perception. Not one of the former, oh no, not at all. By no means.

Pause.

May I say how very kind it was of you to ask me in? In fact, you are kindness itself, probably always are kindness itself, now and in England and in Hampstead and for all eternity.

He looks about the room.

What a remarkably pleasant room. I feel at peace here. Safe from all danger. But please don't be alarmed. I shan't stay long. I never stay long, with others. They do not wish it. And that, for me, is a happy state of affairs. My only security, you see, my true comfort and solace, rests in the confirmation that I elicit from people of all kinds a common and constant level of indifference. It assures me that I am as I think myself to be, that I am fixed, concrete. To show interest in me or, good gracious, anything tending towards a positive liking of me, would cause in me a condition of the acutest alarm. Fortunately, the danger is remote.

Pause.

I speak to you with this startling candour because you are clearly a reticent man, which appeals, and because you are a stranger to me, and because you are clearly kindness itself.

Pause.

Do you often hang about Hampstead Heath?

HIRST No.

SPOONER But on your excursions . . . however rare . . . on your rare excursions . . . you hardly expect to run into the likes of me? I take it?

HIRST Hardly.

SPOONER I often hang about Hampstead Heath myself, expecting nothing. I'm too old for any kind of expectation. Don't you agree?

HIRST Yes.

SPOONER A pitfall and snare, if ever there was one. But of course I observe a good deal, on my peeps through twigs. A wit once entitled me a betwixt-twig peeper. A most clumsy construction, I thought.

HIRST Infelicitous.

SPOONER My Christ you're right.

Pause.

HIRST What a wit.

SPOONER You're most acutely right. All we have left is the English language. Can it be salvaged? That is my question.

HIRST You mean in what rests its salvation?

SPOONER More or less.

HIRST Its salvation must rest in you.

SPOONER It's uncommonly kind of you to say so. In you too, perhaps, although I haven't sufficient evidence to go on, as yet.

Pause.

HIRST You mean because I've said little?

SPOONER You're a quiet one. It's a great relief. Can you imagine two of us gabbling away like me? It would be intolerable.

Pause.

By the way, with reference to peeping, I do feel it incumbent upon me to make one thing clear. I don't peep on sex. That's gone forever. You follow me? When my twigs happen to shall I say rest their peep on sexual conjugations, however periphrastic, I see only whites of eyes, so close, they glut me, no distance possible, and when you can't keep the proper distance between yourself and others, when you can no longer maintain an objective relation to matter, the game's not worth the candle, so forget it and remember that what is obligatory to keep in your vision is space, space in moonlight particularly, and lots of it.

HIRST You speak with the weight of experience behind you.

SPOONER And beneath me. Experience is a paltry thing. Everyone has it and will tell his tale of it. I leave experience to psychological interpreters, the wetdream world. I myself can do any graph of experience you wish, to suit your taste or mine. Child's play. The present will not be distorted. I am a poet. I am interested in where I am eternally present and active.

Hirst stands, goes to cabinet, pours vodka.

I have gone too far, you think?

HIRST I'm expecting you to go very much further.

SPOONER Really? That doesn't mean I interest you, I hope?

HIRST Not in the least.

SPOONER Thank goodness for that. For a moment my heart sank.

Hirst draws the curtains aside, looks out briefly, lets curtain fall, remains standing.

But nevertheless you're right. Your instinct is sound. I could go further, in more ways than one. I could advance, reserve my defences, throw on a substitute, call up the cavalry, or throw everything forward out of the knowledge that when joy overfloweth there can be no holding of joy. The point I'm trying to make, in case you've missed it, is that I am a free man.

Hirst pours himself another vodka and drinks it. He puts the glass down, moves carefully to his chair, sits.

HIRST It's a long time since we had a free man in this house.

SPOONER We?

HIRST I.

SPOONER Is there another?

HIRST Another what?

SPOONER People. Person.

HIRST What other?

SPOONER There are two mugs on that shelf.

HIRST The second is for you.

SPOONER And the first?

HIRST Would you like to use it? Would you like some hot refreshment?

SPOONER That would be dangerous. I'll stick to your scotch, if I may.

HIRST Help yourself.

SPOONER Thank you.

He goes to cabinet.

HIRST I'll take a whisky with you, if you would be so kind.

SPOONER With pleasure. Weren't you drinking vodka?

HIRST I'll be happy to join you in a whisky.

Spooner pours.

SPOONER You'll take it as it is, as it comes?

HIRST Oh, absolutely as it comes.

Spooner brings Hirst his glass.

SPOONER Your very good health.

HIRST Yours.

They drink.

Tell me . . . do you often hang about Jack Straw's Castle?

SPOONER I knew it as a boy.

HIRST Do you find it as beguiling a public house now as it was in the days of the highwaymen, when it was frequented by highwaymen? Notably Jack Straw. The great Jack Straw. Do you find it much changed?

SPOONER It changed my life.

HIRST Good Lord. Did it really?

SPOONER I refer to a midsummer night, when I shared a drink with a Hungarian émigré, lately retired from Paris.

HIRST The same drink?

SPOONER By no means. You've guessed, I would imagine, that he was an erstwhile member of the Hungarian aristocracy?

HIRST I did guess, yes.

SPOONER On that summer evening, led by him, I first appreciated how quiet life can be, in the midst of yahoos and hullabaloos. He exerted on me a quite uniquely . . . calming influence, without exertion, without any . . . desire to influence. He was so much older than me. My expectations in those days, and I confess I had expectations in those days, did not include him in their frame of reference. I'd meandered over to Hampstead Heath, a captive to memories of a more than usually pronounced grisliness, and found myself, not much to my surprise, ordering a pint at the bar of Jack Straw's Castle. This achieved, and having negotiated a path through a particularly repellent lick-spittling herd of literati, I stumbled, unseeing, with my pint, to his bald, tanned, unmoving table. How bald he was.

Pause.

I think, after quite half my pint had descended, never to be savoured again, that I spoke, suddenly, suddenly spoke, and received . . . a response, no other word will do, a response, the like of which—

HIRST What was he drinking?

SPOONER What?

HIRST What was he drinking?

SPOONER Pernod.

Pause.

I was impressed, more or less at that point, by an intuition that he possessed a measure of serenity the like of which I had never encountered.

HIRST What did he say?

Spooner stares at him.

SPOONER You expect me to remember what he said?

HIRST No.

Pause.

SPOONER What he said . . . all those years ago . . . is neither here nor there. It was not what he said but possibly the way he sat which has remained with me all my life and has, I am quite sure, made me what I am.

Pause.

And I met you at the same pub tonight, although at a different table.

Pause.

And I wonder at you, now, as once I wondered at him. But will I wonder at you tomorrow, I wonder, as I still wonder at him today?

HIRST I cannot say.

SPOONER It cannot be said.

Pause.

I'll ask you another question. Have you any idea from what I derive my strength?

HIRST Strength? No.

SPOONER I have never been loved. From this I derive my strength. Have you? Ever? Been loved?

HIRST Oh, I don't suppose so.

SPOONER I looked up once into my mother's face. What I saw there was nothing less than pure malevolence. I was fortunate to escape with my life. You will want to know what I had done to provoke such hatred in my own mother.

HIRST You'd pissed yourself.

SPOONER Quite right. How old do you think I was at the time?

HIRST Twenty-eight.

SPOONER Quite right. However, I left home soon after.

Pause.

My mother remains, I have to say, a terribly attractive woman in many ways. Her buns are the best.

Hirst looks at him.

Her currant buns. The best.

HIRST Would you be so kind as to pour me another drop of whisky?

SPOONER Certainly.

Spooner takes the glass, pours whisky into it, gives it to Hirst.

SPOONER Perhaps it's about time I introduced myself. My name is Spooner.

HIRST Ah.

SPOONER I'm a staunch friend of the arts, particularly the art of poetry, and a guide to the young. I keep open house. Young poets come to me. They read me their verses. I comment, give them coffee, make no charge. Women are admitted, some of whom are also poets. Some are not. Some of the men are not. Most of the men are not. But with the windows open to the garden, my wife pouring long glasses of squash, with ice, on a summer evening, young voices occasionally lifted in unaccompanied ballad, young bodies lying in the dying light, my wife moving through the shadows in her long gown, what can ail? I mean who can gainsay us? What quarrel can be found with what is, *au fond*, a gesture towards the sustenance and preservation of art, and through art to virtue?

HIRST Through art to virtue. (*Raises glass*.) To your continued health.

Spooner sits, for the first time.

SPOONER When we had our cottage . . . when we had our cottage . . . we gave our visitors tea, on the lawn.

HIRST I did the same.

SPOONER On the lawn?

HIRST I did the same.

SPOONER You had a cottage?

HIRST Tea on the lawn.

SPOONER What happened to them? What happened to our cottages? What happened to our lawns?

Pause.

Be frank. Tell me. You've revealed something. You've made an unequivocal reference to your past. Don't go back on it. We share something. A memory of the bucolic life. We're both English.

Pause.

HIRST In the village church, the beams are hung with garlands, in honour of young women of the parish, reputed to have died virgin.

Pause.

However, the garlands are not bestowed on maidens only, but on all who die unmarried, wearing the white flower of a blameless life.

Pause.

SPOONER You mean that not only young women of the parish but also young men of the parish are so honoured?

HIRST I do.

SPOONER And that old men of the parish who also died maiden are so garlanded?

HIRST Certainly.

SPOONER I am enraptured. Tell me more. Tell me more about the quaint little perversions of your life and times. Tell me more, with all the authority and brilliance you can muster, about the socio-politico-economic structure of the environment in which you attained to the age of reason. Tell me more.

Pause.

HIRST There is no more.

SPOONER Tell me then about your wife.

HIRST What wife?

SPOONER How beautiful she was, how tender and how true. Tell me with what speed she swung in the air, with what velocity she came off the wicket, whether she was responsive to finger spin, whether you could bowl a shooter with her, or an offbreak with a legbreak action. In other words, did she google?

Silence.

You will not say. I will tell you then . . . that my wife . . . had everything. Eyes, a mouth, hair, teeth, buttocks, breasts, absolutely everything. And legs.

HIRST Which carried her away.

SPOONER Carried who away? Yours or mine?

Pause.

Is she here now, your wife? Cowering in a locked room, perhaps?

Pause.

Was she ever here? Was she ever there, in your cottage? It is my duty to tell you you have failed to convince. I am an honest and intelligent man. You pay me less than my due. Are you, equally, being fair to the lady? I begin to wonder whether truly accurate and therefore essentially poetic definition means anything to you at all. I begin to wonder whether you do in fact truly remember her, whether you truly did love her, truly caressed her, truly did cradle her, truly did husband her, falsely dreamed or did truly adore her. I have seriously questioned these propositions and find them threadbare.

Silence.

Her eyes, I take it, were hazel?

Hirst stands, carefully. He moves, with a slight stagger, to the cabinet, pours whisky, drinks.

HIRST Hazel shit.

SPOONER Good lord, good lord, do I detect a touch of the maudlin?

Pause.

Hazel shit. I ask myself: Have I ever seen hazel shit? Or hazel eyes, for that matter?

Hirst throws his glass at him, ineffectually. It bounces on the carpet.

Do I detect a touch of the hostile? Do I detect—with respect—a touch of too many glasses of ale followed by the great malt which wounds? Which wounds?

Silence.

HIRST Tonight . . . my friend . . . you find me in the last lap of a race . . . I had long forgotten to run.

Pause.

SPOONER A metaphor. Things are looking up.

Pause.

I would say, albeit on a brief acquaintance, that you lack the essential quality of manliness, which is to put your money where your mouth is, to pick up a pintpot and know it to be a pintpot, and knowing it to be a pintpot, to declare it as a pintpot, and to stay faithful to that pintpot as though you had given birth to it out of your own arse. You lack that capability, in my view.

Pause.

Do forgive me my candour. It is not method but madness.

He stands.

Heed me. I am a relevant witness. And could be a friend.

Hirst grips the cabinet, rigid.

You need a friend, You have a long hike, my lad, up which, presently, you slog unfriended. Let me perhaps be your boatman. For if and when we talk of a river we talk of a deep and dank architecture. In other words, never disdain a helping hand, especially one of such rare quality. And it is not only the quality of my offer which is rare, it is the act itself, the offer itself —quite without precedent. I offer myself to you as a friend. Think before you speak.

Hirst attempts to move, stops, grips the cabinet.

Remember this. You've lost your wife of hazel hue, you've lost her and what can you do, she will no more come back to you, with a tillifola tillifola tillifoladi-foladi-foloo.

HIRST No.

Pause.

No man's land . . . does not move . . . or change . . . or grow old . . . remains . . . forever . . . icy . . . silent.

Hirst loosens his grip on the cabinet, staggers across the room, holds on to a chair.

He waits, moves, falls.

He waits, gets to his feet, moves, falls.

Spooner watches.

Hirst crawls towards the door, manages to open it, crawls out of the door.

Spooner remains still.

SPOONER I have known this before. The exit through the door, by way of belly and floor.

He looks at the room, walks about it, looking at each object closely, stops, hands behind his back, surveying the room.

A door, somewhere in the house, closes.

Silence.

The front door opens, and slams sharply. Spooner stiffens, is still.

FOSTER *enters the room. He is casually dressed.*

He stops still upon seeing Spooner. He stands, looking at Spooner.

Silence.

FOSTER What are you drinking? Christ I'm thirsty. How are you? I'm parched.

He goes to cabinet, opens a bottle of beer, pours.

What are you drinking? It's bloody late. I'm worn to a frazzle. This is what I want. (*He drinks.*) Taxi? No chance. Taxi drivers are against me. Something about me. Some unknown factor. My gait, perhaps. Or perhaps because I travel incognito. Oh, that's better. Works wonders. How are you? What are you drinking? Who are you? I thought I'd never make it. What a hike. And not only that. I'm defenceless. I don't carry a gun in London. But I'm not bothered. Once you've done the East you've done it all. I've done the East. But I still like a nice lighthouse like this one. Have you met your host? He's my father. It was our night off tonight, you see. He was going to stay at home, listen to some lieder. I hope he had a quiet and pleasant evening. Who are you, by the way? What are you drinking?

SPOONER I'm a friend of his.

FOSTER You're not typical.

BRIGGS *comes into the room, stops. He is casually dressed, stocky.*

BRIGGS Who's this?

FOSTER His name’s Friend. This is Mr Briggs. Mr Friend—Mr Briggs. I’m Mr Foster. Old English stock. John Foster. Jack. Jack Foster. Old English name. Foster. John Foster. Jack Foster. Foster. This man’s name is Briggs.

Pause.

BRIGGS I’ve seen Mr Friend before.

FOSTER Seen him before?

BRIGGS I know him.

FOSTER Do you really?

BRIGGS I’ve seen you before.

SPOONER Possibly, possibly.

BRIGGS Yes. You collect the beermugs from the tables in a pub in Chalk Farm.

SPOONER The landlord’s a friend of mine. When he’s shorthanded, I give him a helping hand.

BRIGGS Who says the landlord’s a friend of yours?

FOSTER He does.

BRIGGS I’m talking about The Bull’s Head in Chalk Farm.

SPOONER Yes, yes. So am I.

BRIGGS So am I.

FOSTER I know The Bull’s Head. The landlord’s a friend of mine.

BRIGGS He collects the mugs.

FOSTER A firstclass pub. I’ve known the landlord for years.

BRIGGS He says he’s a friend of the landlord.

FOSTER He says he’s a friend of our friend too.

BRIGGS What friend?

FOSTER Our host.

BRIGGS He’s a bloody friend of everyone then.

FOSTER He’s everybody’s bloody friend. How many friends have you got altogether, Mr Friend?

BRIGGS He probably couldn’t count them.

FOSTER Well, there's me too, now. I'm another one of your new friends. I'm your newest new friend. Not him. Not Briggs. He's nobody's fucking friend. People tend to be a little wary of Briggs. They balk at giving him their all. But me they like at first sight.

BRIGGS Sometimes they love you at first sight.

FOSTER Sometimes they do. That's why, when I travel, I get all the gold, nobody offers me dross. People take an immediate shine to me, especially women, especially in Siam or Bali. He knows I'm not a liar. Tell him about the Siamese girls.

BRIGGS They loved him at first sight.

FOSTER (*to Spooner*) You're not Siamese though, are you?

BRIGGS He's a very long way from being Siamese.

FOSTER Ever been out there?

SPOONER I've been to Amsterdam.

Foster and Briggs stare at him.

I mean that was the last place . . . I visited. I know Europe well. My name is Spooner, by the way. Yes, one afternoon in Amsterdam . . . I was sitting outside a café by a canal. The weather was superb. At another table, in shadow, was a man whistling under his breath, sitting very still, almost rigid. At the side of the canal was a fisherman. He caught a fish. He lifted it high. The waiter cheered and applauded, the two men, the waiter and the fisherman, laughed. A little girl, passing, laughed. Two lovers, passing, kissed. The fish was lofted, on the rod. The fish and the rod glinted in the sun, as they swayed. The fisherman's cheeks were flushed, with pleasure. I decided to paint a picture—of the canal, the waiter, the child, the fisherman, the lovers, the fish, and in background, in shadow, the man at the other table, and to call it The Whistler. The Whistler. If you had seen the picture, and the title, would the title have baffled you?

Pause.

FOSTER (*to Briggs*) Do you want to answer that question?

BRIGGS No. Go on. You answer it.

FOSTER Well, speaking for myself, I think I would have been baffled by that title. But I might have appreciated the picture. I might even have been grateful for it.

Pause.

Did you hear what I said? I might have been grateful for the picture. A good work of art tends to move me. You follow me? I'm not a cunt, you know.

Pause.

I'm very interested to hear you're a painter. You do it in your spare time, I suppose?

SPOONER Quite.

FOSTER Did you ever paint that picture, The Whistler?

SPOONER Not yet, I'm afraid.

FOSTER Don't leave it too long. You might lose the inspiration.

BRIGGS Ever painted a beermug?

SPOONER You must come and see my collection, any time you wish.

BRIGGS What of, beermugs?

SPOONER No, no. Paintings.

FOSTER Where do you keep it?

SPOONER At my house in the country. You would receive the warmest of welcomes.

FOSTER Who from?

SPOONER My wife. My two daughters.

FOSTER Really? Would they like me? What do you think? Would they love me at first sight?

SPOONER (*laughing*) Quite possibly.

FOSTER What about him?

Spooner looks at Briggs.

SPOONER They are remarkably gracious women.

FOSTER You're a lucky man. What are you drinking?

SPOONER Scotch.

Foster goes to cabinet, pours scotch, stands holding glass.

FOSTER What do you make of this? When I was out East . . . once . . . a kind of old stinking tramp, bollock naked, asked me for a few bob. I didn't know him. He was a complete stranger. But I could see immediately he wasn't a man to trust. He had a dog with him. They only had about one eye between them. So I threw him some sort of coin. He caught this bloody coin, looked at it with a bit of distaste, and then he threw the coin back. Well, automatically I went to catch it, I clutched at it, but the bloody coin disappeared into thin air. It didn't drop anywhere. It just disappeared . . . into thin air . . . on its way towards me. He then let out a few curses and pissed off, with his dog. Oh, here's your whisky, by the way. (*Hands it to him*.) What do you make of that incident?

SPOONER He was a con artist.

FOSTER Do you think so?

SPOONER You would be wise to grant the event no integrity whatsoever.

FOSTER You don't subscribe to the mystery of the Orient?

SPOONER A typical Eastern contrick.

FOSTER Double Dutch, you mean?

SPOONER Certainly. Your good health. (*Drinks*.)

Hirst enters, wearing a dressing-gown.

Briggs goes to cabinet, pours whisky.

HIRST I can't sleep. I slept briefly. I think. Perhaps it was sufficient. Yes. I woke up, out of a dream. I feel cheerful. Who'll give me a glass of whisky?

Hirst sits. Briggs brings him whisky.

My goodness, is this for me? How did you know? You knew. You're very sensitive. Cheers. The first today. What day is it? What's the time? Is it still night?

BRIGGS Yes.

HIRST The same night? I was dreaming of a waterfall. No, no, of a lake. I think it was . . . just recently. Can you remember when I went to bed? Was it daylight? It's good to go to sleep in the late afternoon. After tea and toast. You hear the faint beginnings of the evening sounds, and then nothing. Everywhere else people are changing for dinner. You're tucked up, the shutters closed, gaining a march on the world.

He passes his glass to Briggs, who fills and returns it.

Something is depressing me. What is it? It was the dream, yes. Waterfalls. No, no, a lake. Water. Drowning. Not me. Someone else. How nice to have company. Can you imagine waking up, finding no one here, just furniture, staring at you? Most unpleasant. I've known that condition, I've been through that period—cheers—I came round to human beings in the end. Like yourselves. A wise move. I tried laughing alone. Pathetic. Have you all got drinks?

He looks at Spooner.

Who's that? A friend of yours? Won't someone introduce me?

FOSTER He's a friend of yours.

HIRST In the past I knew remarkable people. I've a photograph album somewhere. I'll find it. You'll be impressed by the faces. Very handsome. Sitting on grass with hampers. I had a moustache. Quite a few of my friends had moustaches. Remarkable faces. Remarkable moustaches. What was it informed the scene? A tenderness towards our fellows, perhaps. The sun shone. The girls had lovely hair, dark, sometimes red. Under their dresses their bodies were white. It's all in my album. I'll find it. You'll be struck by the charm of the girls, their grace, the ease with which they sit, pour tea, loll. It's all in my album.

He empties glass, holds it up.

Who is the kindest among you?

Briggs takes glass to cabinet.

Thank you. What would I do without the two of you? I'd sit here forever, waiting for a stranger to fill up my glass. What would I do while I waited? Look through my album? Make plans for the future?

BRIGGS (*bringing glass*) You'd crawl to the bottle and stuff it between your teeth.

HIRST No. I drink with dignity.

He drinks, looks at Spooner.

Who is this man? Do I know him?

FOSTER He says he's a friend of yours.

HIRST My true friends look out at me from my album. I had my world. I have it. Don't think now that it's gone I'll choose to sneer at it, to cast doubt on it, to wonder if it properly existed. No. We're talking of my youth, which can never leave me. No. It existed. It was solid, the people in it were solid, while . . . transformed by light, while being sensitive . . . to all the changing light.

When I stood my shadow fell upon her. She looked up. Give me the bottle. Give me the bottle.

Briggs gives him the bottle. He drinks from it.

It's gone. Did it exist? It's gone. It never existed. It remains.

I am sitting here forever.

How kind of you. I wish you'd tell me what the weather's like. I wish you'd damnwell tell me what night it is, this night or the next night or the other one, the night before last. Be frank. Is it the night before last?

Help yourselves. I hate drinking alone. There's too much solitary shittery.

What was it? Shadows. Brightness, through leaves. Gambolling. In the bushes. Young lovers. A fall of water. It was my dream. The lake. Who was drowning in my dream?

It was blinding. I remember it. I've forgotten. By all that's sacred and holy. The sounds stopped. It was freezing. There's a gap in me. I can't fill it. There's a flood running through me. I can't plug it. They're blotting me out. Who is doing it? I'm suffocating. It's a muff. A muff, perfumed. Someone is doing me to death.

She looked up. I was staggered. I had never seen anything so beautiful. That's all poison. We can't be expected to live like that.

I remember nothing. I'm sitting in this room. I see you all, every one of you. A sociable gathering. The dispositions are kindly.

Am I asleep? There's no water. No one is drowning.

Yes, yes, come on, come on, come on, pipe up, speak up, speak up, speak up, you're fucking me about, you bastards, ghosts, long ghosts, you're making noises, I can hear you humming, I wear a crisp blue shirt at the Ritz, I wear a crisp blue shirt at the Ritz, I know him well, the wine waiter, Boris, Boris, he's been there for years, blinding shadows, then a fall of water—

SPOONER It was I drowning in your dream.

Hirst falls to the floor. They all go to him. Foster turns to Spooner.

FOSTER Bugger off.

Briggs pulls Hirst up. Hirst wards him off.

HIRST Unhand me.

He stands erect. Spooner moves to him.

SPOONER He has grandchildren. As have I. As I have. We both have fathered. We are of an age. I know his wants. Let me take his arm. Respect our age. Come, I'll seat you.

He takes Hirst's arm and leads him to a chair.

There's no pity in these people.

FOSTER Christ.

SPOONER I am your true friend. That is why your dream . . . was so distressing. You saw me drowning in your dream. But have no fear. I am not drowned.

FOSTER Christ.

SPOONER (*to Hirst*) Would you like me to make you some coffee?

BRIGGS He thinks he's a waiter in Amsterdam.

FOSTER Service non compris.

BRIGGS Whereas he's a pintpot attendant in The Bull's Head. And a pisspot attendant as well.

FOSTER Our host must have been in The Bull's Head tonight, where he had an unfortunate encounter. (*To Spooner*.) Hey scout, I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding. You're not in some shithouse down by the docks. You're in the home of a man of means, of a man of achievement. Do you understand me?

He turns to Briggs.

Why am I bothering? Tell me. Eh?

He turns back to Spooner.

Listen chummybum. We protect this gentleman against corruption, against men of craft, against men of evil, we could destroy you without a glance, we take care of this gentleman, we do it out of love.

He turns to Briggs.

Why am I talking to him? I'm wasting my time with a nonstarter. I must be going mad. I don't usually talk. I don't have to. Normally I keep quiet.

He turns back to Spooner.

I know what it is. There's something about you fascinates me.

SPOONER It's my bearing.

FOSTER That's what it must be.

BRIGGS I've seen Irishmen chop his balls off.

FOSTER I suppose once you've had Irishmen you've had everything. (*To Spooner*.) Listen. Keep it tidy. You follow? You've just laid your hands on a rich and powerful man. It's not what you're used to, scout. How can I make it clear? This is another class. It's another realm of operation. It's a world of silk. It's a world of organdie. It's a world of flower arrangements. It's a world of eighteenth-century cookery books. It's nothing to do with toffeeapples and a packet of crisps. It's milk in the bath. It's the cloth bellpull. It's organisation.

BRIGGS It's not rubbish.

FOSTER It's not rubbish. We deal in originals. Nothing duff, nothing ersatz, we don't open any old bottle of brandy. Mind you don't fall into a quicksand. (*To Briggs.*) Why don't I kick his head off and have done with it?

SPOONER I'm the same age as your master. I used to picnic in the country too, at the same time as he.

FOSTER Listen, my friend. This man in this chair, he's a creative man. He's an artist. We make life possible for him. We're in a position of trust. Don't try to drive a wedge into a happy household. You understand me? Don't try to make a nonsense out of family life.

BRIGGS (*to Foster*) If you can't, I can.

He moves to Spooner and beckons to him, with his forefinger.

BRIGGS Come here.

HIRST Where are the sandwiches? Cut the bread.

BRIGGS It's cut.

HIRST It is not cut. Cut it!

Briggs stands still.

BRIGGS I'll go and cut it.

He leaves the room.

HIRST (*to Spooner*) I know you from somewhere.

FOSTER I must clean the house. No one else'll do it. Your financial adviser is coming to breakfast. I've got to think about that. His taste changes from day to day. One day he wants boiled eggs and toast, the next day orange juice and poached eggs, the next scrambled eggs and smoked salmon, the next a mushroom omelette and champagne. Any minute now it'll be dawn. A new day. Your financial adviser's dreaming of his breakfast. He's dreaming of eggs. Eggs, eggs. What kind of eggs? I'm exhausted. I've been up all night. But it never stops. Nothing stops. It's all fizz. This is my life. I have my brief arousals. They leave me panting. I can't take the pace in London. Nobody knows what I miss.

Briggs enters and stands, listening.

I miss the Siamese girls. I miss the girls in Bali. You don't come across them over here. You see them occasionally, on the steps of language schools, they're learning English, they're not prepared to have a giggle and a cuddle in their own language. Not in Regent Street. A giggle and a

cuddle. Sometimes my ambitions extend no further than that. I could do something else. I could make another life. I don't have to waste my time looking after a pisshound. I could find the right niche and be happy. The right niche, the right happiness.

BRIGGS We're out of bread. I'm looking at the housekeeper. Neurotic poof. He prefers idleness. Unspeakable ponce. He prefers the Malay Straits, where they give you hot toddy in a fourposter. He's nothing but a vagabond cock. (*To Spooner*.) Move over.

Spooner moves out of his way.

BRIGGS (*to Hirst*) Get up.

Hirst slowly stands. Briggs leads him to the door.

BRIGGS (*to Hirst*) Keep on the move. Don't look back.

HIRST I know that man.

Briggs leads Hirst out of the room.

Silence.

FOSTER Do you know what I saw once in the desert, in the Australian desert? A man walking along carrying two umbrellas. Two umbrellas. In the outback.

Pause.

SPOONER Was it raining?

FOSTER No. It was a beautiful day. I nearly asked him what he was up to but I changed my mind.

SPOONER Why?

FOSTER Well, I decided he must be some kind of lunatic. I thought he would only confuse me.

Foster walks about the room, stops at the door.

Listen. You know what it's like when you're in a room with the light on and then suddenly the light goes out? I'll show you. It's like this.

He turns the light out.

BLACKOUT

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ACT TWO

Morning.

Spooner is alone in the room. The curtains are still closed, but shafts of light enter the room.

He is sitting.

He stands, goes slowly to door, tries handle, with fatigue, withdraws.

SPOONER I have known this before. Morning. A locked door. A house of silence and strangers.

He sits, shivers.

The door is unlocked. Briggs comes in, key in hand. He is wearing a suit. He opens the curtains. Daylight.

BRIGGS I've been asked to inquire if you're hungry.

SPOONER Food? I never touch it.

BRIGGS The financial adviser didn't turn up. You can have his breakfast. He phoned his order through, then phoned again to cancel the appointment.

SPOONER For what reason?

BRIGGS Jack spoke to him, not me.

SPOONER What reason did he give your friend?

BRIGGS Jack said he said he found himself without warning in the centre of a vast aboriginal financial calamity.

Pause.

SPOONER He clearly needs an adviser.

Pause.

BRIGGS I won't bring you breakfast if you're going to waste it.

SPOONER I abhor waste.

Briggs goes out.

I have known this before. The door unlocked. The entrance of a stranger. The offer of alms. The shark in the harbour.

Silence.

Briggs enters carrying a tray. On the tray are breakfast dishes covered by silver lids and a bottle of champagne in a bucket.

He places the tray on a small table and brings a chair to the table.

BRIGGS Scrambled eggs. Shall I open the champagne?

SPOONER Is it cold?

BRIGGS Freezing.

SPOONER Please open it.

Briggs begins to open bottle. Spooner lifts lids, peers, sets lids aside, butters toast.

SPOONER Who is the cook?

BRIGGS We share all burdens, Jack and myself.

Briggs pours champagne. Offers glass. Spooner sips.

Pause.

SPOONER Thank you.

Spooner begins to eat. Briggs draws up a chair to the table and sits, watching.

BRIGGS We're old friends, Jack and myself. We met at a street corner. I should tell you he'll deny this account. His story will be different. I was standing at a street corner. A car drew up. It was him. He asked me the way to Bolsover Street. I told him Bolsover Street was in the middle of an intricate one-way system. It was a one-way system easy enough to get into. The only trouble was that, once in, you couldn't get out. I told him his best bet, if he really wanted to get to Bolsover Street, was to take the first left, first right, second right, third on the left, keep his eye open for a hardware shop, go right round the square, keeping to the inside lane, take the second mews on the right and then stop. He will find himself facing a very tall office block, with a crescent courtyard. He can take advantage of this office block. He can go round the crescent, come out the other way, follow the arrows, go past two sets of traffic lights and take the next left indicated by the first green filter he comes across. He's got the Post Office

Tower in his vision the whole time. All he's got to do is to reverse into the underground car park, change gear, go straight on, and he'll find himself in Bolsover Street with no trouble at all. I did warn him, though, that he'll still be faced with the problem, having found Bolsover Street, of losing it. I told him I knew one or two people who'd been wandering up and down Bolsover Street for years. They'd wasted their bloody youth there. The people who live there, their faces are grey, they're in a state of despair, but nobody pays any attention, you see. All people are worried about is their illgotten gains. I wrote to *The Times* about it. Life At A Dead End, I called it. Went for nothing. Anyway, I told him that probably the best thing he could do was to forget the whole idea of getting to Bolsover Street. I remember saying to him: This trip you've got in mind, drop it, it could prove fatal. But he said he had to deliver a parcel. Anyway, I took all this trouble with him because he had a nice open face. He looked like a man who would always do good to others himself. Normally I wouldn't give a fuck. I should tell you he'll deny this account. His story will be different.

Spooner places the lid on his plate.

Briggs pours champagne into Spooner's glass.

When did you last have champagne for breakfast?

SPOONER Well, to be quite honest, I'm a champagne drinker.

BRIGGS Oh, are you?

SPOONER I know my wines. (*He drinks*.) Dijon. In the thirties. I made many trips to Dijon, for the winetasting, with my French translator. Even after his death, I continued to go to Dijon, until I could go no longer.

Pause.

Hugo. A good companion.

Pause.

You will wonder of course what he translated. The answer is my verse. I am a poet.

Pause.

BRIGGS I thought poets were young.

SPOONER I am young. (*He reaches for the bottle*.) Can I help you to a glass?

BRIGGS No, thank you.

Spooner examines the bottle.

SPOONER An excellent choice.

BRIGGS Not mine.

SPOONER (*pouring*) Translating verse is an extremely difficult task. Only the Rumanians remain respectable exponents of the craft.

BRIGGS Bit early in the morning for all this, isn't it?

Spooner drinks.

Finish the bottle. Doctor's orders.

SPOONER Can I enquire as to why I was locked in this room, by the way?

BRIGGS Doctor's orders.

Pause.

Tell me when you're ready for coffee.

Pause.

It must be wonderful to be a poet and to have admirers. And translators. And to be young. I'm neither one nor the other.

SPOONER Yes. You've reminded me. I must be off. I have a meeting at twelve. Thank you so much for breakfast.

BRIGGS What meeting?

SPOONER A board meeting. I'm on the board of a recently inaugurated poetry magazine. We have our first meeting at twelve. Can't be late.

BRIGGS Where's the meeting?

SPOONER At The Bull's Head in Chalk Farm. The landlord is kindly allowing us the use of a private room on the first floor. It is essential that the meeting be private, you see, as we shall be discussing policy.

BRIGGS The Bull's Head in Chalk Farm?

SPOONER Yes. The landlord is a friend of mine. It is on that account that he has favoured us with a private room. It is true of course that I informed him Lord Lancer would be attending the meeting. He at once appreciated that a certain degree of sequesteredness would be the order of the day.

BRIGGS Lord Lancer?

SPOONER Our patron.

BRIGGS He's not one of the Bengal Lancers, is he?

SPOONER No, no. He's of Norman descent.

BRIGGS A man of culture?

SPOONER Impeccable credentials.

BRIGGS Some of these aristocrats hate the arts.

SPOONER Lord Lancer is a man of honour. He loves the arts. He has declared this love in public. He never goes back on his word. But I must be off. Lord Lancer does not subscribe to the view that poets can treat time with nonchalance.

BRIGGS Jack could do with a patron.

SPOONER Jack?

BRIGGS He's a poet.

SPOONER A poet? Really? Well, if he'd like to send me some examples of his work, double spaced on quarto, with copies in a separate folder by separate post in case of loss or misappropriation, stamped addressed envelope enclosed, I'll read them.

BRIGGS That's very nice of you.

SPOONER Not at all. You can tell him he can look forward to a scrupulously honest and, if I may say so, highly sensitive judgement.

BRIGGS I'll tell him. He's in real need of a patron. The boss could be his patron, but he's not interested. Perhaps because he's a poet himself. It's possible there's an element of jealousy in it, I don't know. Not that the boss isn't a very kind man. He is. He's a very civilised man. But he's still human.

Pause.

SPOONER The boss . . . is a poet himself?

BRIGGS Don't be silly. He's more than that, isn't he? He's an essayist and critic as well. He's a man of letters.

SPOONER I thought his face was familiar.

The telephone buzzes. Briggs goes to it, lifts it, listens.

BRIGGS Yes, sir.

Briggs picks up the tray and takes it out.

Spooner sits still.

SPOONER I have known this before. The voice unheard. A listener. The command from an upper floor.

He pours champagne.

Hirst enters, wearing a suit, followed by Briggs.

HIRST Charles. How nice of you to drop in.

He shakes Spooner's hand.

Have they been looking after you all right? Denson, let's have some coffee.

Briggs leaves the room.

You're looking remarkably well. Haven't changed a bit. It's the squash, I expect. Keeps you up to the mark. You were quite a dab hand at Oxford, as I remember. Still at it? Wise man. Sensible chap. My goodness, it's years. When did we last meet? I have a suspicion we last dined together in '38, at the club. Does that accord with your recollection? Croxley was there, yes, Wyatt, it all comes back to me, Burston-Smith. What a bunch. What a night, as I recall. All dead now, of course. No, no! I'm a fool. I'm an idiot. Our last encounter—I remember it well. Pavilion at Lord's in '39, against the West Indies, Hutton and Compton batting superbly, Constantine bowling, war looming. Surely I'm right? We shared a particularly fine bottle of port. You look as fit now as you did then. Did you have a good war?

Briggs comes in with coffee, places it on table.

Oh thank you, Denson. Leave it there, will you? That will do.

Briggs leaves the room.

How's Emily? What a woman. (*Pouring.*) Black? Here you are. What a woman. Have to tell you I fell in love with her once upon a time. Have to

confess it to you. Took her out to tea, in Dorchester. Told her of my yearning. Decided to take the bull by the horns. Proposed that she betray you. Admitted you were a damn fine chap, but pointed out I would be taking nothing that belonged to you, simply that portion of herself all women keep in reserve, for a rainy day. Had an infernal job persuading her. Said she adored you, her life would be meaningless were she to be false. Plied her with buttered scones, Wiltshire cream, crumpets and strawberries. Eventually she succumbed. Don't suppose you ever knew about it, what? Oh, we're too old now for it to matter, don't you agree?

He sits, with coffee.

I rented a little cottage for the summer. She used to motor to me twice or thrice a week. I was an integral part of her shopping expeditions. You were both living on the farm then. That's right. Her father's farm. She would come to me at tea-time, or at coffee-time, the innocent hours. That summer she was mine, while you imagined her to be solely yours.

He sips the coffee.

She loved the cottage. She loved the flowers. As did I. Narcissi, crocus, dog's tooth violets, fuchsia, jonquils, pinks, verbena.

Pause.

Her delicate hands.

Pause.

I'll never forget her way with jonquils.

Pause.

Do you remember once, was it in '37, you took her to France? I was on the same boat. Kept to my cabin. While you were doing your exercises she came to me. Her ardour was, in my experience, unparalleled. Ah well.

Pause.

You were always preoccupied with your physical . . . condition . . . weren't you? Don't blame you. Damn fine figure of a chap. Natural athlete. Medals, scrolls, your name inscribed in gold. Once a man has breasted the tape, alone, he is breasting the tape forever. His golden moment can never be tarnished. Do you run still? Why was it we saw so

little of each other, after we came down from Oxford? I mean, you had another string to your bow, did you not? You were a literary man. As was I. Yes, yes, I know we shared the occasional picnic, with Tubby Wells and all that crowd, we shared the occasional whisky and soda at the club, but we were never close, were we? I wonder why. Of course I was successful awfully early.

Pause.

You did say you had a good war, didn't you?

SPOONER A rather good one, yes.

HIRST How splendid. The RAF?

SPOONER The Navy.

HIRST How splendid. Destroyers?

SPOONER Torpedo boats.

HIRST First rate. Kill any Germans?

SPOONER One or two.

HIRST Well done.

SPOONER And you?

HIRST I was in Military Intelligence.

SPOONER Ah.

Pause.

HIRST You pursued your literary career, after the war?

SPOONER Oh yes.

HIRST So did I.

SPOONER I believe you've done rather well.

HIRST Oh quite well, yes. Past my best now.

SPOONER Do you ever see Stella?

Pause.

HIRST Stella?

SPOONER You can't have forgotten.

HIRST Stella who?

SPOONER Stella Winstanley.

HIRST Winstanley?

SPOONER Bunty Winstanley's sister.

HIRST Oh, Bunty. No, I never see her.

SPOONER You were rather taken with her.

HIRST Was I, old chap? How did you know?

SPOONER I was terribly fond of Bunty. He was most dreadfully annoyed with you. Wanted to punch you on the nose.

HIRST What for?

SPOONER For seducing his sister.

HIRST What business was it of his?

SPOONER He was her brother.

HIRST That's my point.

Pause.

What on earth are you driving at?

SPOONER Bunty introduced Rupert to Stella. He was very fond of Rupert. He gave the bride away. He and Rupert were terribly old friends. He threatened to horsewhip you.

HIRST Who did?

SPOONER Bunty.

HIRST He never had the guts to speak to me himself.

SPOONER Stella begged him not to. She implored him to stay his hand. She implored him not to tell Rupert.

HIRST I see. But who told Bunty?

SPOONER I told Bunty. I was frightfully fond of Bunty. I was also frightfully fond of Stella.

Pause.

HIRST You appear to have been a close friend of the family.

SPOONER Mainly of Arabella's. We used to ride together.

HIRST Arabella Hinscott?

SPOONER Yes.

HIRST I knew her at Oxford.

SPOONER So did I.

HIRST I was very fond of Arabella.

SPOONER Arabella was very fond of me. Bunty was never sure of precisely how fond she was of me, nor of what form her fondness took.

HIRST What in God's name do you mean?

SPOONER Bunty trusted me. I was best man at their wedding. He also trusted Arabella.

HIRST I should warn you that I was always extremely fond of Arabella. Her father was my tutor. I used to stay at their house.

SPOONER I knew her father well. He took a great interest in me.

HIRST Arabella was a girl of the most refined and organised sensibilities.

SPOONER I agree.

Pause.

HIRST Are you trying to tell me that you had an affair with Arabella?

SPOONER A form of an affair. She had no wish for full consummation. She was content with her particular predilection. Consuming the male member.

Hirst stands.

HIRST I'm beginning to believe you're a scoundrel. How dare you speak of Arabella Hinscott in such a fashion? I'll have you blackballed from the club!

SPOONER Oh my dear sir, may I remind you that you betrayed Stella Winstanley with Emily Spooner, my own wife, throughout a long and soiled summer, a fact known at the time throughout the Home Counties? May I further remind you that Muriel Blackwood and Doreen Busby have never recovered from your insane and corrosive sexual absolutism? May I

further remind you that your friendship with and corruption of Geoffrey Ramsden at Oxford was the talk of Balliol and Christchurch Cathedral?

HIRST This is scandalous! How dare you? I'll have you horsewhipped!

SPOONER It is you, sir, who have behaved scandalously. To the fairest of sexes, of which my wife was the fairest representative. It is you who have behaved unnaturally and scandalously, to the woman who was joined to me in God.

HIRST I, sir? Unnaturally? Scandalously?

SPOONER Scandalously. She told me all.

HIRST You listen to the drivellings of a farmer's wife?

SPOONER Since I was the farmer, yes.

HIRST You were no farmer, sir. A weekend wanker.

SPOONER I wrote my Homage to Wessex in the summerhouse at West Upfield.

HIRST I have never had the good fortune to read it.

SPOONER It is written in terza rima, a form which, if you will forgive my saying so, you have never been able to master.

HIRST This is outrageous! Who are you? What are you doing in my house?

He goes to the door and calls.

Denson! A whisky and soda!

He walks about the room.

You are clearly a lout. The Charles Wetherby I knew was a gentleman. I see a figure reduced. I am sorry for you. Where is the moral ardour that sustained you once? Gone down the hatch.

Briggs enters, pours whisky and soda, gives it to Hirst. Hhirst looks at it.

Down the hatch. Right down the hatch. (*He drinks.*) I do not understand . . . I do not understand . . . and I see it all about me . . . continually . . . how the most sensitive and cultivated of men can so easily change, almost overnight, into the bully, the cutpurse, the brigand. In my day nobody changed. A man was. Only religion could alter him, and that at least was a glorious misery.

He drinks, and sits in his chair.

We are not banditti here. I am prepared to be patient. I shall be kind to you. I shall show you my library. I might even show you my study. I might even show you my pen, and my blottingpad. I might even show you my footstool.

He holds out his glass.

Another.

Briggs takes glass, fills it, returns it.

I might even show you my photograph album. You might even see a face in it which might remind you of your own, of what you once were. You might see faces of others, in shadow, or cheeks of others, turning, or jaws, or backs of necks, or eyes, dark under hats, which might remind you of others, whom once you knew, whom you thought long dead, but from whom you will still receive a sidelong glance, if you can face the good ghost. Allow the love of the good ghost. They possess all that emotion . . . trapped. Bow to it. It will assuredly never release them, but who knows . . . what relief . . . it may give to them . . . who knows how they may quicken . . . in their chains, in their glass jars. You think it cruel . . . to quicken them, when they are fixed, imprisoned? No . . . no. Deeply, deeply, they wish to respond to your touch, to your look, and when you smile, their joy . . . is unbounded. And so I say to you, tender the dead, as you would yourself be tendered, now, in what you would describe as your life.

He drinks.

BRIGGS They’re blank, mate, blank. The blank dead.

Silence.

HIRST Nonsense.

Pause.

Pass the bottle.

BRIGGS No.

HIRST What?

BRIGGS I said no.

HIRST No pranks. No mischief. Give me the bottle.

Pause.

BRIGGS I've refused.

HIRST Refusal can lead to dismissal.

BRIGGS You can't dismiss me.

HIRST Why not?

BRIGGS Because I won't go.

HIRST If I tell you to go, you will go. Give me the bottle.

Silence.

Hirst turns to Spooner.

HIRST Bring me the bottle.

Spooner goes to cabinet. Briggs does not move. Spooner picks up whisky bottle, takes it to Hirst. Hirst pours and places bottle at his side.

BRIGGS I'll have one myself.

Briggs takes a glass to the bottle, pours and drinks.

HIRST What impertinence. Well, it doesn't matter. He was always a scallywag. Is it raining? It so often rains, in August, in England. Do you ever examine the gullies of the English countryside? Under the twigs, under the dead leaves, you'll find tennis balls, blackened. Girls threw them for their dogs, or children, for each other, they rolled into the gully. They are lost there, given up for dead, centuries old.

Foster comes into the room.

FOSTER It's time for your morning walk.

Pause.

I said it's time for your morning walk.

HIRST My morning walk? No, no, I'm afraid I don't have the time this morning.

FOSTER It's time for your walk across the Heath.

HIRST I can't possibly. I'm too busy. I have too many things to do.

FOSTER What's that you're drinking?

SPOONER The great malt which wounds.

HIRST (*to Spooner*) My God, you haven't got a drink. Where's your glass?

SPOONER Thank you. It would be unwise to mix my drinks.

HIRST Mix?

SPOONER I was drinking champagne.

HIRST Of course you were, of course. Albert, another bottle.

BRIGGS Certainly, sir.

Briggs goes out.

HIRST I can't possibly. I have too many things to do. I have an essay to write. A critical essay. We'll have to check the files, find out what it is I'm supposed to be appraising. At the moment it's slipped my mind.

SPOONER I could help you there.

HIRST Oh?

SPOONER On two counts. Firstly, I have the nose of a ferret. I can find anything in a file. Secondly, I have written any number of critical essays myself. Do you actually have a secretary?

FOSTER I'm his secretary.

SPOONER A secretarial post does less than justice to your talents. A young poet should travel. Travel and suffer. Join the navy, perhaps, and see the sea. Voyage and explore.

FOSTER I've sailored. I've been there and back. I'm here where I'm needed.

Briggs enters with champagne, stops at door, listens.

SPOONER (*to Hirst*) You mentioned a photograph album. I could go through it with you. I could put names to the faces. A proper exhumation could take place. Yes, I am confident that I could be of enormous aid in that area.

FOSTER Those faces are nameless, friend.

Briggs comes into room, sets down champagne bucket.

BRIGGS And they'll always be nameless.

HIRST There are places in my heart . . . where no living soul . . . has . . . or can ever . . . trespass.

Briggs opens champagne, pours glass for Spooner.

BRIGGS Here you are. Fresh as a daisy. (*To Hirst*.) A drop for you, sir?

HIRST No, no. I'll stay . . . where I am.

BRIGGS I'll join Mr Friend, if I may, sir?

HIRST Naturally.

BRIGGS (*to Foster*) Where's your glass?

FOSTER No thanks.

HIRST Oh come on, be sociable. Be sociable. Consort with the society to which you're attached. To which you're attached as if by bonds of steel. Mingle.

Briggs pours a glass for Foster.

FOSTER It isn't even lunchtime.

BRIGGS The best time to drink champagne is before lunch, you cunt.

FOSTER Don't call me a cunt.

HIRST We three, never forget, are the oldest of friends.

BRIGGS That's why I called him a cunt.

FOSTER (*to Briggs*) Stop talking.

Hirst lifts his glass.

HIRST To our good fortune.

Mutters of 'Cheers'. They all drink. Hirst looks at the window.

HIRST The light . . . out there . . . is gloomy . . . hardly daylight at all. It is falling, rapidly. Distasteful. Let us close the curtains. Put the lamps on.

Briggs closes the curtains, lights lamps.

HIRST Ah. What relief.

Pause.

How happy it is.

Pause.

Today I shall come to a conclusion. There are certain matters . . . which today I shall resolve.

SPOONER I'll help you.

FOSTER I was in Bali when they sent for me. I didn't have to leave, I didn't have to come here. But I felt I was . . . called . . . I had no alternative. I didn't have to leave that beautiful isle. But I was intrigued. I was only a boy. But I was nondescript and anonymous. A famous writer wanted me. He wanted me to be his secretary, his chauffeur, his housekeeper, his amanuensis. How did he know of me? Who told him?

SPOONER He made an imaginative leap. Few can do it. Few do it. He did it. And that's why God loves him.

BRIGGS You came on my recommendation. I've always liked youth because you can use it. But it has to be open and honest. If it isn't open and honest you can't use it. I recommended you. You were open, the whole world before you.

FOSTER I find the work fruitful. I'm in touch with a very special intelligence. This intelligence I find nourishing. I have been nourished by it. It's enlarged me. Therefore it's an intelligence worth serving. I find its demands natural. Not only that. They're legal. I'm not doing anything crooked. It's a relief. I could so easily have been bent. I have a sense of dignity in my work, a sense of honour. It never leaves me. Of service to a cause.

He refers to Briggs.

He is my associate. He was my proposer. I've learnt a great deal from him. He's been my guide. The most unselfish person I've ever met. He'll tell you. Let him speak.

BRIGGS Who to?

FOSTER What?

BRIGGS Speak? Who to?

Foster looks at Spooner.

FOSTER To . . . him.

BRIGGS To him? To a pisshole collector? To a shithouse operator? To a jamrag vendor? What the fuck are you talking about? Look at him. He's a mingejuice bottler, a fucking shitcake baker. What are you talking to him for?

HIRST Yes, yes, but he's a good man at heart. I knew him at Oxford.

Silence.

SPOONER (*to Hirst*) Let me live with you and be your secretary.

HIRST Is there a big fly in here? I hear buzzing.

SPOONER No.

HIRST You say no.

SPOONER Yes.

Pause.

I ask you . . . to consider me for the post. If I were wearing a suit such as your own you would see me in a different light. I'm extremely good with tradespeople, hawkers, canvassers, nuns. I can be silent when desired or, when desired, convivial. I can discuss any subject of your choice—the future of the country, wild flowers, the Olympic Games. It is true I have fallen on hard times, but my imagination and intelligence are unimpaired. My will to work has not been eroded. I remain capable of undertaking the gravest and most daunting responsibilities. Temperamentally I can be what you wish. My character is, at core, a humble one. I am an honest man and, moreover, I am not too old to learn. My cooking is not to be sneezed at. I lean towards French cuisine but food without frills is not beyond my competency. I have a keen eye for dust. My kitchen would be immaculate. I am tender towards objects. I would take good care of your silver. I play chess, billiards, and the piano. I could play Chopin for you. I could read the Bible to you. I am a good companion.

Pause.

My career, I admit it freely, has been chequered. I was one of the golden of my generation. Something happened. I don't know what it was. Nevertheless I am I and have survived insult and deprivation. I am I. I offer myself not abjectly but with ancient pride. I come to you as a

warrior. I shall be happy to serve you as my master. I bend my knee to your excellence. I am furnished with the qualities of piety, prudence, liberality and goodness. Decline them at your peril. It is my task as a gentleman to remain amiable in my behaviour, courageous in my undertakings, discreet and gallant in my executions, by which I mean your private life would remain your own. However, I shall be sensible to the least wrong offered you. My sword shall be ready to dissever all manifest embodiments of malign forces that conspire to your ruin. I shall regard it as incumbent upon me to preserve a clear countenance and a clean conscience. I will accept death's challenge on your behalf. I shall meet it, for your sake, boldly, whether it be in the field or in the bedchamber. I am your chevalier. I had rather bury myself in a tomb of honour than permit your dignity to be sullied by domestic enemy or foreign foe. I am yours to command.

Silence.

Hirst is still, sitting. Foster and Briggs are still, standing.

SPOONER Before you reply, I would like to say one thing more. I occasionally organise poetry readings, in the upstairs room of a particular public house. They are reasonably well attended, mainly by the young. I would be happy to offer you an evening of your own. You could read your own work, to an interested and informed audience, to an audience brimming over with potential for the greatest possible enthusiasm. I can guarantee a full house, and I will be happy to arrange a straightforward fee for you or, if you prefer, a substantial share of the profits. The young, I can assure you, would flock to hear you. My committee would deem it a singular honour to act as your host. You would be introduced by an authority on your work, perhaps myself. After the reading, which I am confident will be a remarkable success, we could repair to the bar below, where the landlord – who happens to be a friend of mine – would I know be overjoyed to entertain you, with the compliments of the house. Nearby is an Indian restaurant of excellent standing, at which you would be the guest of my committee. Your face is so seldom seen, your words, known to so many, have been so seldom heard, in the absolute authority of your own rendering, that this event would qualify for that rarest of categories: the unique. I beg you to consider seriously the social implications of such an

adventure. You would be there in body. It would bring you to the young, the young to you. The elderly, also, those who have almost lost hope, would on this occasion leave their homes and present themselves. You would have no trouble with the press. I would take upon myself the charge of keeping them from nuisance. Perhaps you might agree to half a dozen photographs or so, but no more. Unless of course you positively wished, on such an occasion, to speak. Unless you preferred to hold, let us say, a small press conference, after the reading, before supper, whereby you could speak through the press to the world. But that is by the by, and would in no sense be a condition. Let us content ourselves with the idea of an intimate reading, in a pleasing and conducive environment, let us consider an evening to be remembered, by all who take part in her.

Silence.

HIRST Let us change the subject.

Pause.

For the last time.

Pause.

What have I said?

FOSTER You said you're changing the subject for the last time.

HIRST But what does that mean?

FOSTER It means you'll never change the subject again.

HIRST Never?

FOSTER Never.

HIRST Never?

FOSTER You said for the last time.

HIRST But what does that *mean*? What does it *mean*?

FOSTER It means forever. It means that the subject is changed once and for all and for the last time forever. If the subject is winter, for instance, it'll be winter forever.

HIRST Is the subject winter?

FOSTER The subject is now winter. So it'll therefore be winter forever.

BRIGGS And for the last time.

FOSTER Which will last forever. If the subject is winter, for example, spring will never come.

HIRST But let me ask you—I must ask you—

FOSTER Summer will never come.

BRIGGS The trees—

FOSTER Will never bud.

HIRST I must ask you—

BRIGGS Snow—

FOSTER Will fall forever. Because you've changed the subject. For the last time.

HIRST But have we? That's my question. Have I? Have we changed the subject?

FOSTER Of course. The previous subject is closed.

HIRST What was the previous subject?

FOSTER It's forgotten. You've changed it

HIRST What is the present subject?

FOSTER That there is no possibility of changing the subject since the subject has now been changed.

BRIGGS For the last time.

FOSTER So that nothing else will happen forever. You'll simply be sitting here forever.

BRIGGS But not alone.

FOSTER No. We'll be with you. Briggs and me.

Pause.

HIRST It's night.

FOSTER And will always be night.

BRIGGS Because the subject—

FOSTER Can never be changed.

Silence.

HIRST But I hear sounds of birds. Don't you hear them? Sounds I never heard before. I hear them as they must have sounded then, when I was young, although I never heard them then, although they sounded about us then.

Pause.

Yes. It is true. I am walking towards a lake. Someone is following me, through the trees. I lose him, easily. I see a body in the water, floating. I am excited. I look closer and see I was mistaken. There is nothing in the water. I say to myself, I saw a body, drowning. But I am mistaken. There is nothing there.

Silence.

SPOONER No. You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent.

Silence.

HIRST I'll drink to that.

He drinks.

SLOW FADE

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HAROLD PINTER (1930–2008) is one of the twentieth century's most highly recognized dramatists. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the David Cohen British Literature Prize for a lifetime's achievement in literature, and the Laurence Olivier Award for a lifetime's achievement in theater, as well as many other honors. His best-known plays include *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *No Man's Land*, and *Betrayal*.

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